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THESIS BOOKLET

POLICY OF NON-FORMAL ADULT EDUCATION IN
THE COALITION PERIOD. ADDENDA TO THE
HISTORY OF ORGANIZATIONS GOVERNING FREE
EDUCATION (1945-1949)

DOCTORAL PhD. DISSERTATION

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I. SUBJECT MATTER AND OBJECTIVES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION, REASONS FOR SELECTING TOPIC

In my thesis, I intend to present the non-formal adult education system of a period of Hungarian history the uniqueness of which is well known by researchers investigating 20th-century history of education in Hungary. The term ‘coalition period’ refers to the “artificially maintained” settings of the political regime between 1945 and 1948, when probably the richest treasury of opportunities was created (also) at cultural level in addition to a hope for democracy in the period between World War II and the 1989 change of regime. The “popular education” concept of the era, which became known under the term free education, should be interpreted as the product of a unique political setting where opportunities and limits could be changed flexibly in the eyes of political players ruling and aspiring to power. This variability constituted the basis and viability of free education, and this was the reason for its subsequent termination. Specificities of this era included inter-party agreements dividing the various ministries among each other, though not on the basis of election results. The “agreements” providing a democratic framework, concluded by those interested in the coalition, were present not only at the scenes of politics: this notion could also be perceived in the composition of the organizations responsible for culture and education. Thus, the Ministry of Religion and Public Education,

responsible for popular education, “came to be” controlled by *count Géza Teleki* (Civil Democratic Party) through a compromise by consensus, who held this position while the temporary National Government was in power. His successor was *Dezső Keresztury*, representing the National Peasant Party, though acting as a “professional”, who also came to head the culture portfolio as a result of a party compromise. The last Minister of Culture of the period was *Gyula Ortutay*, member of the Smallholders’ Party, but secretly acting as a communist, under whose leadership the Ministry of Popular Education started to be framed, which was headed first by *József Révai*. The party affiliation of Ministers of Culture also properly indicates the relation of labor parties to culture and education.

The operation of organizations controlling free education – that is, non-formal adult education outside of an official schooling system in the coalition period – represented an interesting facet of cultural history in Hungary also because they attempted to implement the outlines of a unique concept in practice – although in a short time available – focusing on the autonomy of local cultural organizations and independent initiatives. The basic tenets of free education – it can be stated with perfect confidence – can set an example for 21st-century cultural policy. Free education was characterized by the fact that cultural life was governed along three lines. On the one hand, professional (and at the same time state-controlled) management was centered in the cultural portfolio, establishing its institutional (the so-called supervisory and managing) network of free education. On the other hand, social organizations were also

involved in the shaping of non-formal adult education by way of local councils of free education, their top organization being the National Council of Free Education, also acting as an advisory body to the cultural portfolio. Besides, formation of the scenes of culture came to be represented as an increasingly important objective / task for parties and mass organizations as time went by. It was through this process that such organizations turned into the third “pillar” of free education.

In my dissertation, I intend to contribute to the elaboration of the history of public and social organizations controlling free education as mentioned above in order to fill a gap, since though representatives of the history of education in Hungary have studied the history of non-formal adult education of this period from various aspects, yet these researchers mostly focused on a single county or on the analysis of cultural events, or only partly touched on (hidden) connections behind events in their summary works. Therefore I have set several objectives for myself. Primarily, I attempt to present the period of free education broken down into clearly separable intervals. In view of the tendencies characterizing each period, I expound the concepts of the different parties, ministerial decisions and proceedings related to free education, and the activities of the National Council of Free Education. Furthermore, I intend to provide a comprehensive picture of the ideas of people and denominations involved in the formation of the ideology of free education. I also attempt to investigate points of connection between management bodies and to indicate their objectives, their position and

role within the entire “system”, showing the context between concepts with a bearing on education and aspirations for power (ideology).

II. MAIN ISSUES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Free education was a characteristic “product” of the age: leaders thereof believed in the opportunities offered by the democratic state; still, as the second change of regime in 1948 approached, survival seemed to be possible in compliance with the expectations of the ruling power as the scope for action got increasingly constricted. Thus, the history of free education is not only a chapter in the story of adult education in Hungary, but also an expression of Hungarian democratic thinking in the 20th century.

In the light of the statements above, I seek answers for the following questions in my thesis:

1. One of the central issues of this research is: which of the political decisions of the era influenced the general direction of non-formal adult education between 1945 and 1949? As the parties determining the policies of the period (the Hungarian Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party – and afterwards the Hungarian Workers’ Party established by the fusion of the former two parties – and the National Peasant Party) had their concepts of adult education, the question arises what role was assigned to free education by these organizations in the struggle for power.

2. In the analysis of the activities performed by the bodies governing free education (the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and the National Council of Free Education) I seek to answer the question what objectives were set by these institutions for the public and social players of free education.

3. I intended to find out what laws and decrees were to regulate the organizational framework of free education. A further question is, on what principles cultural assets were transferred by the network of so-called “free schools”.

4. Another issue relevant to the topic is, along what lines of ideas the democratic “reeducation” of social strata was envisaged by prominent individuals having an influence on the ideology of free education.

III. LOCATIONS AND METHODS OF RESEARCH; THESIS STRUCTURE

I found my primary sources on the era of free education in various archives. I essentially— and first and foremost – visited such institutions located in Budapest. Since in my dissertation I study the period of free education from various – mostly political – aspects, it was inevitable to explore the documents in the Archives of Political History and Trade Unions. In respect of my research, useful archived documents included those of canvassing and propaganda, as well as of the departments of intellectuals and education of the Hungarian Communist Party, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, and the National Peasant Party from the period

between 1945 and 1947. I would like to point out here that my dissertation does not cover the popular education concept of the Independent Smallholders Party because this party performed its activities to this end mainly through the Peasant Alliance – crumbled up in the party struggles in 1947 –, falling outside of the sphere of authority of free education taken in the strict sense. And *Gyula Ortutay*, head of portfolio representing the smallholders party, was an unconditional servant of communist schemes.

As regards the documents to be found in the Hungarian National Archives, fundamental sources for my thesis included documents of departments VI and VIII of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. In addition to ministry documents, I inspected here documents produced by the Department of Canvassing and Propaganda of the Hungarian Workers' Party in 1948-49, which provided indispensable information to be used for the chapter presenting the closure of the period. Documents in the Municipal Archives of Budapest represented an appropriate complement to the materials to be found in the institutions above: valuable documents for me included reports by the free education managers operating in the outskirts of the capital, as well as documents on popular education relaunched in the capital in 1945. Documents by the free education supervisor of Pest County included in the fond preserved in the Pest County Archives (PML) included several circulars – not available among the documents of other archives – which clearly showed the principles along which free education was attempted to be governed. Among the documents of Széchenyi Library and Manuscript Archives, I found

useful documents relating primarily to the free education concepts of *Dezső Keresztury* and *Máté Kovács*. In order to present the free education activities of the Catholic Church most extensively, I visited the Primate's Archives in Esztergom, as well as the Episcopal and Prebendal Archives at Vác, where I found only few but very interesting documents in the documentation of *Actio Catholica*. Among the documents in the Historical Archives of State Security Services, I found records on the activities of *Dezső Keresztury*, *Albert Bereczky*, and *Zsigmond Mihailovics* among the individuals closely related to my topic. Furthermore, I conducted research in the Synodical Archives of the Hungarian Calvinist Church, as well as in the Ráday Archives of the Calvinist Diocese along the River Danube, to be found in Ráday Street, Budapest. I summarized the history of the Free Education Academy of Sárospatak based on the documents available at the Data Repository of the Scientific Collection of the Calvinist College of Sárospatak. I processed my sources by a traditional method of history: qualitative data analysis. I compared and analyzed primary documents with secondary sources, which helped reveal causal relationships.

In my dissertation, I broke down the era of free education into four periods; I intend to depict their specificities through their analysis. Through the activities of governing organizations, I attempt to indicate the political atmosphere which also determined the system of objectives of free education to a great extent. Composition of the chapters of my thesis was specified by the chronological approach so characteristic of historical works.

In the first chapter, I point out similarities and differences between the popular education concepts of systems existed by outlining the most important junctions of the history of adult education in Hungary between the turn of the century and 1945 (the periods of dualism, the Soviet Republic, and the Horthy era, respectively).

In the second chapter, I trace the development of free education and culture from the months of liberation (relief?) until late 1945. Here I study opinions on educators and perceptions of democracy among social issues.

The third chapter presents the period of evolution of free education, where I follow through the history of popular education from the spring of 1946 up to the “blue slip” elections. This chapter is longer than the others because I take a detour in this part – temporarily abandoning chronological narration – to summarize the views of the ideologists of free education (*Sándor Karácsony, Ferenc Gombos, Máté Kovács, Lajos Szathmáry, Dénes Kövendi*) on pedagogy and adult education. The subchapters included here provide just an outline of the free education activities of the Catholic and Calvinist Churches.

In the fourth chapter, I again follow the chronological order presented in previous parts, discussing the time interval ranging from the fall of 1947 to the establishment of the Hungarian Workers’ Party. The fifth and last part presents, in an “irregular” manner, only the scenes of the practical implementation of the popular education policy of the Hungarian Workers’ Party. I close the era of free education with the year

1949, also representing the year when the establishment of popular education following the principles of socialist / communist ideology commenced.

IV. MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The questions presented above can be answered on the whole as follows. Free education “operating” from the 1890s to World War I can be mentioned as a predecessor of non-formal adult education in 1945-1948/49 (showing similarities therewith at several points). The concept of free education studied in my dissertation can be approached by a narrower or a broader interpretation. If it is intended to be defined in a broader context, it will include all the trends of popular education of the coalition period and the associated plans and ideas, such as the cultural policy activities of diverse parties and mass organizations. Taken in a narrower sense, however, it will comprise popular education activities and principles of civil democratic semblance which became the trend of non-formal adult education outside of the official public schooling system between 1945 and 1948. As a matter of fact, it was the practical realization of civic education to spread and popularize a peasant culture evolving along the notions of *Sándor Karácsony*. Scenes (and objectives) of education included the elimination of illiteracy, as well as the dissemination of political knowledge in addition to training for family life and a healthy lifestyle. The value (uniqueness?) of free education lies in the fact that in addition to the state-enforced hierarchic system, it was / could have been also possible to operate autonomous

local organizations taking into consideration the needs of smaller communities. According to the original concept, the so-called free education councils would have been allowed to elect their own members, but in reality, organizations interested in national politics (parties, trade unions, and mass organizations operated by parties as “cover organizations”) managed to exert increasing influence in bodies governing local cultural life by circumventing opportunities provided by law. It followed from this that although the ideology of free education was based on democratic and autonomous principles, yet in practice it failed to be exempt from endeavors of centralization.

The first period of free education from the spring of 1945 to the turn of 1945/1946 is characterized by the fact that parties primarily strived for the stabilization of the economy in the new situation created by the conclusion of World War II. Although their programs included concepts on / references to culture and education, they only represented general interpretations of the role of culture. The Social Democratic Party made attempts to provide opportunities for culture mainly to the working class through the Workers’ Cultural Society (organized together with the communists). Throughout the period discussed, the party was characterized by promoting the interests of workers; this was the reason why it was social democrats who arraigned most sharply free education propagating peasant culture. Therefore it is not at all surprising that the party did not initiate closer connections with free education. Communists followed a more flexible approach to the system in formation, supporting “popular” initiatives. At the time, the

Hungarian Communist Party tried to bring cultural knowledge to the countryside mainly by the itinerant teacher movement for propaganda purposes. Also due to its orientation, the National Peasant Party was the strongest supporter of the development of free education under the given circumstances. In this initial phase, the task of establishing the new system was undertaken by Department VI of Non-Formal Popular Education within the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. The department tackled this job in three aspects. On the one hand, it specified the limits of its own role and responsibility, and on the other hand, it regulated by decree the operations of state and social organizations newly set up, and it published a periodical. Perhaps the most important legal regulation passed in this period is decree 12.100/1945 issued by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education on 9 October 1945, ruling over the establishment of the National Council of Free Education. The inaugural session of the council was held on 10 December 1945, with Sándor Karácsony elected as president and Sándor Sík as deputy president. Substantial work within the council was performed, in addition to the Presidential Council, by the Education, Political, and Specialist Committees, respectively. As each of the three committees had a leftist chairperson (*Gyula Ortutay*, *József Darvas* and *Erzsébet Andics*), their work got increasingly determined, obviously, by manifestations of their political affiliation and actions against the cultural activities of the churches.

The second phase of free education, lasting from the spring of 1946 to the blue slip elections in 1947, already represented the period of development of state

and social organizations. As regards the parties, while the Social Democratic Party still sharply criticized the evolving organization, the Hungarian Communist Party used free education to launch the movement named Free Land Winter Evenings, hosting lectures on culture and agriculture in this period. At the time, communists strived for cooperation with free education, mainly where the cultural activities of the local organization were not invigorated. Another initiative by the party to embrace rural education as well was the movement of rural attendants, involving the renovation of public buildings as well as partisan doctors and teachers giving advice. At the time, the main endeavor of the National Peasant Party was to form a leadership layer of peasants using free education; the concept was supported within the Ministry of Religion and Public Education by peasant party representatives *Máté Kovács* and *Ferenc Gombos*. Their work was also influenced by decree 13.130/1945 by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, pursuant to which an independent “Department of Free Education” was established. Decree 720/1946. ME. broadened the scope of duties of this organizational unit, establishing the free education districts and councils through which attempts were made to ensure the transparency and controllability of the state line. By that time, the three-stage model of the “*state*” system of free education was developed: *level 1*: the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, as the top organization of free education, including the minister and department VIII (of free education). *Level 2*: the supervisory network of free education districts, consisting of 26 inspectorates. *Level 3*: the free education management network of districts,

towns, and villages. Furthermore, the decree also regulated the spheres of authority of supervisors and managers, for whom individual positions were established in the course of 1946. Parallely with this decree, the structure of the “*social*” line was framed; it was also implemented at three levels: 1. the National Council of Free Education, operating as a top organization. 2. County councils were intended to assist the work of county councils of free education. 3. Town and village councils of free education made arrangements for community cultural programs. It is important to mention that Budapest represented a separate unit, where the Popular Education Center of Budapest was responsible for organizing non-formal adult education events. After the establishment of administrative units, decree 5000/1946 was enacted by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, setting up the network of so-called free schools. Here, also striving for a triplicate partition, primary free schools, secondary peasant colleges and workers’ lyceums, as well as tertiary popular colleges were established. Free education academies were treated as a separate category, the role of which was / would have been to train subsequent leaders of free education. The implementation order of the decree – No. 104 240/1946 by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education – and the guide to the curriculum including an outline – No. 107 389/1946 by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education – provided free scope for action to schools, as neither the quantity nor the syllabus of the subject matter of instruction to be completed were specified. It was an important decision in the operation of free schools that the duties of free

education and of the Hungarian Popular Education Institute were separated by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in 1946. While the former was responsible for the maintenance of free schools, the latter provided courses to assist adults in continuing their studies in a formal schooling system. The “pretended” government support of the wide-ranging activities of free education was also perceivable in the 1946/47 budget of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, with 5.5% of the total budget of the ministry allocated, and not modified at the request of either the council or the department. The council started substantial work in early 1946 being aware of the figures above. At this stage, the perhaps most decisive measures by the National Council of Free Education included editing the specialist periodical titled “New Plough” from January 1947, and the launch of courses to eliminate illiteracy. An event to directly affect the council and also having an impact on its assessment was the exposure of a “plot” against the republic, in the course of which the council exercised self-criticism and several members thereof were dismissed. The anticlericalism of the age (in spite of the religious affiliation of prominent personalities of free education) and the degree of influence of left-wing parties were also manifested in the decisions passed by the council: a proper example is that a church subcommittee within the specialist committee was refused to be set up.

The third period – being a short seeming heyday – was the term between the fall of 1947 and the summer of 1948. The Social Democratic Party did not change its earlier strategy to criticize free education. In turn, the

communist party started to recognize the significance of free education, which is made clear by the establishment of the “Sub-Department of Popular Education” within the Propaganda Department. The system was sharply criticized and by this time the idea occurred within the party to reduce the state line in addition to abolishing the National Council of Free Education, thus dooming them to perish. Pushed by the party, the Ministry of Religion and Public Education started to expel “non-democratic” supervisors and managers from the spring of 1948. A “Division of Free Education” was set up within the ministry, to be headed by *Elemér Kerékgyártó*, a communist party member (and later on by *Kálmán E. Kovács*, also a communist party member). This change in leadership also indicates that this field was also started to be dominated by the Hungarian Communist Party by the spring of 1948. The symbolic closing chord of the period was a conference at Révfülöp (to which *Sándor Karácsony* was not even invited), where the leaders attending were made to exercise self-criticism, on the one hand, and new tasks were presented on the other hand, which latter were already intended to help stabilize the socialist / communist state. An “Inter-Departmental Committee” was set up within the National Council of Free Education, in an attempt to coordinate and regulate the free education work performed by various ministries and mass organizations. In addition, it was set as a main task for the council to reduce illiteracy and take action against the catholic organization named Actio Chatolica.

The adult education system of the fourth and actually last period between the summer of 1948 and the spring of 1949 was only named as free education. The

Hungarian Workers' Party, established by the fusion of the communist and social democratic parties, was to develop its own popular education network as the sole possessor of power already; the objective was not to spread the culture of peasant strata, but to promote the party and to prefer the cultural interests of the working class. Then the initiative was taken by mass organizations instead of local free education councils, which also meant that free education came to be reduced to the formation of cadres and arrangements for local celebrations and electoral programs. Decree 12.250/1948 by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education stipulated the reorganization of the National Council of Free Education, to be assigned only a nominal role afterwards. The operation of social organizations was also influenced by Government Decree 10.640/1948, ordering so-called "cultural committees" to be set up in lieu of local councils to be abolished. And ordinance 232.814/1948 by Department VIII of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education resolved on the establishment of so-called free education committees, operated already as organizations of local party representatives. Free education was in actual fact discontinued by decree 4.267/1949./208/M.T. by the Council of Ministers, as this was the legal regulation to set up the Ministry of Popular Education to be headed by *József Révai*, who subsequently acted as one of the most marked advocates of the "cultural revolution".

Looking back on the period of free education between 1945 and 1949, it can be stated in summary that it was a theory reflecting civil values, which – due to the coalition – evolved as a reasonable adult education

alternative appearing to be feasible, where all concepts except for extreme right ideology were attempted to be included. However, this diversity rather intensified the criticism of free education as the communist takeover approached, which finally led to its extermination. So ultimately, free education may be interpreted as an opportunity only, with no real potential for actual development. Nevertheless, it can serve for drawing conclusions also to people dealing with education in the 21st century.

OWN PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION TOPIC:

Farkas, Péter (2014): Művelődéspolitikai és felnőttképzési koncepciók az 1945-1948 közötti Magyarországon [Cultural policy and adult education concepts in Hungary in 1945-1948] In: Andl, Helga - Molnár- Kovács, Zsófia (ed.): *Iskola a társadalmi térben és időben [Schools in social space and time]* IV. Pécs University of Sciences, Pécs. (75-85).

Farkas, Péter (2013): Momentumok Szathmáry Lajos pedagógiai tevékenységéből és a szabadművelődés időszakában betöltött szerepéből [Snapshots of the pedagogical activities of Lajos Szathmáry and his role in the period of free education]. In: Koncz, István, Nagy, Edit (ed.) *Tudományos Próbapálya [Scientific Test Track]*: PEME VI. Ph.D. conference. (44-51).

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